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# **Liberation Theology and Scripture**

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With excerpts from:

## **A Concise History of Liberation Theology**

By Leonardo and Clodovis Boff

From the book “**Introducing Liberation Theology**” published by Orbis Books.

# Liberation Theology and Scripture

Liberation Theology arose in the 1960's, and it coincided with a new approach by Catholic priests and Protestant pastors working with the people at the bottom of society in Central and South America. Three factors are important:

1. They started meeting with each other across denominational lines, bringing their concerns about the social, economic and political situations in which their parishioners were situated, and analysing how such issues could be challenged in practice in the light of their faith. (cf. attached article A CONCISE HISTORY OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY by Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, below).
2. They began publishing a number of books using this term 'liberation theology'. The term was coined by Gustavo Gutierrez in his 1971 book A THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, and it was followed by many other books by many authors on the same topic. (cf bibliographies in accompanying article)
3. They also encouraged the formation of discussion groups among parishioners in the slums and shantytowns, where real-life situations could be reviewed.

Here, (i) They often used the educational methods of Paulo Friere.

and (ii) They encouraged these groups to build a "people's theology" based on a double foundation of Scripture and Real Life, rather than on Philosophy and Natural Law or older theological writings, which had dominated theology for centuries.

Their method was to form groups known in Spanish as 'Christian Communities of the Base'. This has often been mis-translated in English as 'Basic Christian Communities' or 'Small Christian Communities', but the word 'Base' referred to the base of society where society was split into class divisions. In Marxist terms the Base would be the working class. This laid these priests open to accusations of propagating Marxism, and much has been written about that. I won't go into that, as so much material is available.

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## Scripture

What I do wish to develop is the third point, namely that these groups used scripture rather than Philosophy or Natural Law or theological texts in their discussions. There is an enormous amount of material in scripture on liberation, especially liberation from oppression. Group leaders would select a text, and after it was read to the group, all present would be able to relate that text to their daily real-life situations. So the theology was done jointly by these people in the shantytowns and their priests, not solely by traditional theologians based in seminaries and universities. Some priests who were based in those places took leave and went and worked with the people in the shantytowns.

Paulo Friere, whose pedagogical methods were being used by them, admired Gramsci, who believed that everyone had intellectual ability. So these proponents of liberation theology not only believed that all people could do theology, but in the process they also liberated them from being told by professional theologians what to believe.

A book I read some years ago illustrated this well by describing exactly what had happened in a particular group in Brazil meeting regularly over some time. A certain priest, Father Nakanose, introduced a study of the scriptural character King Josiah, described in the Second Book of Kings, chapters 22 & 23. Josiah was believed by him to have been a 'good guy', as he had reformed the Jewish religion at the time, and brought Israel back to the worship of Yahweh, (the God of Moses the liberator). The group of people taking part in the discussion however pointed out that Josiah was actually an oppressor and a murderer, in that he slaughtered quite a number of rural priests who had refused to follow his directives (2 Kings 23 v.20). They started their own study of the biblical text and the social context of the time, and came to the conclusion that Josiah was mainly motivated not by his religious beliefs, but rather by his economic ideas. By turning Jerusalem into a national shrine dedicated to Yahweh, (a shrine to which people had to bring their offerings at Passover time), he was causing the economic resources of the country to be moved from the agricultural areas to the administrative centre, Jerusalem. Rural areas became economically marginalised, while Jerusalem became rich. The people in the discussion group were able to recognize this because of their own economic experiences as poor people in a society with huge divisions between rich and poor, a society controlled by a hegemony of the rich. Academic scripture scholars from a middle-class background had not noticed this. Nakanose later wrote a doctoral thesis about this discovery, and published his findings as *JOSIAH'S PASSOVER, SOCIOLOGY AND THE LIBERATING BIBLE*, Orbis Books 1993). Nakanose did not

invent liberation theology – I merely use this as an example of the type of thing that happens when this method is followed.

Starting in the 1960's, this method was followed by hundreds of groups throughout South and Central America, and soon spread to other Third World countries in Asia and Africa. Because the term 'Liberation Theology' was so closely associated with South America, it was replaced by another term "Contextual Theology", to allow for what was taking place in these other countries. All over the world people began reading the bible in an entirely new way, noticing things like class divisions, economic exploitation, and oppression.

## **The Effects of all this on scriptural studies**

Liberation Theology, originally scorned by many professional theologians and scripture scholars, has nevertheless had a considerable effect on them.

Over the last 30 years biblical scholars have recognized that both the Old Testament and the New Testament are dominated by accounts of both Jewish oppressive kings and foreign conquering emperors, and that many of the key characters in the bible, such as the prophets, are there because of their opposition to these kings and emperors.

## **How to read the Bible so as to follow the plot**

Starting with the Book of Exodus, we have Moses leading the slaves of Egypt out of the control of the Pharaoh of Egypt to the Promised Land about 1200 years BCE. This 'Promised Land' was still in a remote part of the Egyptian Empire, but was ruled locally by Canaanite kings. Their first step on arrival in this land was to take part with the local peasant population in a revolution against these Canaanite kings, and together they set up an egalitarian peasant society without kings or chiefs. (cf. THE TRIBES OF YAHWEH by Norman Gottwald, SCM Press). In the bible it is described in the books of Joshua and Judges. This free peasant society lasted for about 150 years until threats from Philistine colonisers forced them to set up their own military ruling class under King Saul and King David.

David starts as a military commander, and then gets visions of establishing his own Empire, and this is brought to fruition by his son Solomon. In the process Solomon draws on his own people, turning them into periodic 'forced labourers' for his building projects. When Solomon's son and heir continues this practice, a revolt happens, and the empire splits into two smaller kingdoms.

The oppression then becomes internal in both kingdoms, and they live through a period of over 300 years where almost each successive king is portrayed in scripture as being worse than the one before him. This is the period of the early prophets, such as Elijah, Elisha, Amos and Hosea in the northern kingdom and 1<sup>st</sup> Isaiah and Micah in the southern kingdom. They preach against the injustices that are perpetrated by these kings and their supporters.

Josiah (already mentioned) is one of the last of these kings, and the bible describes him as being better than other kings. However, Nakanose's book goes some way to dispel this notion that a king can be good.

The period of kings is followed by a time when they were repeatedly oppressed by invasions from successive foreign Empires, among them the Assyrian Empire (about 700 BCE), and the Babylonian Empire (about 600 BCE). This is then the time of the later prophets (Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zephaniah, Habakkuk and 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah), who develop a new theology to account for the fact that God allowed them to be conquered. The reason has to do with the unjust social practices of their kings and society as a whole.

Further foreign empires take over, including the Persian Empire (500 – 350BCE with a few more prophets), the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great and his successors (300 – 150BCE), and then the Roman Empire at the time of the New Testament. So these Palestinian peasants had a continual struggle lasting 1200 years from all these forms of oppression and economic exploitation. There is one period about a century before Christ where they rule themselves once again, but this home-rule soon degenerates into corruption.

Much work has been done in recent years to place biblical texts into their socio-political context. I think that some of this is the result of liberation theology. In our bibles, the books are not positioned in their historical order, which in the past made it difficult to identify the context of different passages. Modern scripture scholarship has done a lot to overcome this.

When one reads the various parts of the bible in a historical and sociological way like this, one becomes aware that the Jews of Palestine gradually changed their ideas about God, in other words their theology. For the first few centuries they pictured God as a kind of king, their own king, leading them in battle against the kings of foreign empires. Gradually, as they rejected the notion of royalty, (the prophets were spokespeople for God), they became conscious that God was more a God of Justice for the poor, uninterested in power. They began to stress that he is a God who sees the suffering of people, at first the suffering of the people of Israel, but gradually the suffering of all people.

During this long history two distinctly different spiritualities develop – the Temple spirituality, on the one hand, concerned with worship, ritual, money and power, which was supported by priests, kings and emperors; and on the other hand a prophetic spirituality, concerned with justice for the poor. Both spiritualities can be identified in the scriptural writings. Finally, towards the end of the Old Testament period, we get a number of writings more concerned with individual ethical behaviour.

Read in this way as a social commentary, the bible is a truly revolutionary book. The question is then raised as to the meaning of 'inspiration'. ("The Bible is inspired by God"). As I see it today, the inspiration lies in the fact that this whole story is being told and retold.

## **The New Testament**

By the time of Jesus some militant people were still looking forward to the coming of a Messiah who would liberate them from the Roman Empire. So the Gospels portray Jesus as a different kind of Messiah, one who takes on himself the life of a marginalised person, a wandering tramp, with a charisma for attracting the people at the bottom of society, preaching a message that is good news for the poor. It was at the same time a message of bad news for the rich and powerful. It was neither an academic message nor a political one, but a message of a certain way of living, taking people into account. He called for a radical change in our system of values.

There is also an awareness that when Jesus spoke of 'The Kingdom of God', he was not speaking of a future heaven in outer space, nor was he proposing a new political Jewish Empire (the hope of many of the Jews at the time), but rather proposing the end to all Empires. Rather than leading them into battle as a new Messiah, Jesus was proposing a society of justice, peace and love, which you cannot have in any Empire. It was not only a message of love, but also of love even for enemies. He also condemned the exploitative practices of the Jerusalem temple, and he preached against any kind of greed or accumulation of wealth. This was too much for the ruling elite, and they decided that he must be put to death.

So the battle was rather a battle of mind and heart. It was a different kind of liberation.

## **Christianity**

For the first 300 years of Christianity, believers seem to have lived out this message, and as a result they suffered considerable persecution from the authorities of the

Roman Empire, until the time of Constantine the Great. By making Christianity the official religion of his Empire, Constantine largely destroyed or corrupted the movement that had been started by Jesus and his apostles. The church became respected and hierarchical, and at times the Pope was even seen as a type of Emperor. We are still recovering from this mentality today.

Liberation theology helps to remind us of this, and tries to bring about another concept of Christianity. That is why it has had considerable opposition from within the Church itself.

Most recently there has grown in the Church an awareness of other Empires since the days of the New Testament, empires such as the Holy Roman Empire, the various colonial empires that colonized the Third World, Napoleon's and Hitler's empires in Europe, Stalin's empire in Soviet Russia, and particularly today the economic empires such as those of the USA, Japan and Europe. Many Christian thinkers hope that the voice of the church will be heard helping to liberate us from the neo-liberal ideologies that inform the world today.

These changes in church-thinking has also resulted in a new friendliness between church people and movements of marginalised people, as well as with left-wing parties such as socialist parties and communist parties. Parties calling themselves 'Christian Democrats' no longer gain the official support of the Church to the extent that they previously did. However, all these changes are taking time. We can look forward to an interesting future.

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**A Concise History of Liberation Theology starts on Page 9**





# **A Concise History of Liberation Theology**

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## **Antecedents**

The historical roots of liberation theology are to be found in the prophetic tradition of evangelists and missionaries from the earliest colonial days in Latin America -- churchmen who questioned the type of presence adopted by the church and the way indigenous peoples, blacks, mestizos, and the poor rural and urban masses were treated. The names of Bartolomé de Las Casas, Antonio de Montesinos, Antonio Vieira, Brother Caneca and others can stand for a whole host of religious personalities who have graced every century of our short history. They were the source of the type of social and ecclesial understanding that is emerging today.

## **Social and Political Development**

The populist governments of the 1950s and 1960s -- especially those of Perón in Argentina, Vargas in Brazil, and Cárdenas in Mexico -- inspired nationalistic consciousness and significant industrial development in the shape of import substitution. This benefited the middle classes and urban proletariat but threw huge sectors of the peasantry into deeper rural marginalization or sprawling urban shantytowns. Development proceeded along the lines of dependent capitalism, subsidiary to that of the rich nations and excluding the great majorities of national populations. This process led to the creation of strong popular movements seeking profound changes in the socio-economic structure of their countries. These movements in turn provoked the rise of military dictatorships, which sought to safeguard or promote the interests of capital, associated with a high level of "national security" achieved through political repression and police control of all public demonstrations.

In this context the socialist revolution in Cuba stood out as an alternative leading to the dissolution of the chief cause of underdevelopment: dependence. Pockets of armed uprising appeared in many countries, aimed at overthrowing the ruling powers and installing socialist-inspired regimes. There was a great stirring for change among the popular sections of society, a truly prerevolutionary atmosphere.

## **Ecclesial Development**

Starting in the 1960s, a great wind of renewal blew through the churches. They began to take their social mission seriously: lay persons committed themselves to

work among the poor, charismatic bishops and priests encouraged the calls for progress and national modernization. Various church organizations promoted understanding of and improvements in the living conditions of the people: movements such as Young Christian Students, Young Christian Workers, Young Christian Agriculturalists, the Movement for Basic Education, groups that set up educational radio programs, and the first base ecclesial communities.

The work of these -- generally middle-class -- Christians was sustained theologically by the European theology of earthly realities, the integral humanism of Jacques Maritain, the social personalism of Mounier, the progressive evolutionism of Teilhard de Chardin, Henri de Lubac's reflections on the social dimension of dogma, Yves Congar's theology of the laity, and the work of M.-D. Chenu. The Second Vatican Council then gave the best possible theoretical justification to activities developed under the signs of a theology of progress, of authentic secularization and human advancement.

The end of the 1960s, with the crisis of populism and the developmentalist model, brought the advent of a vigorous current of sociological thinking, which unmasked the true causes of underdevelopment. Development and underdevelopment are two sides of the same coin. All the nations of the Western world were engaged in a vast process of development; however, it was interdependent and unequal, organized in such a way that the benefits flowed to the already developed countries of the "center" and the disadvantages were meted out to the historically backward and underdeveloped countries of the "periphery." The poverty of Third World countries was the price to be paid for the First World to be able to enjoy the fruits of overabundance.

In ecclesial circles by now accustomed to following developments in society and studies of its problems, this interpretation acted as a leaven, yielding a new vitality and critical spirit in pastoral circles. The relationship of dependence of the periphery on the center had to be replaced by a process of breaking away and liberation. So the basis of a theology of development was undermined and the theoretical foundations for a theology of liberation were laid. Its material foundations were provided only when popular movements and Christian groups came together in the struggle for social and political liberation, with the ultimate aim of complete and integral liberation. This was when the objective conditions for an authentic liberation theology came about.

## **Theological Development**

The first theological reflections that were to lead to liberation theology had their origins in a context of dialogue between a church and a society in ferment, between Christian faith and the longings for transformation and liberation arising from the people. The Second Vatican Council produced a theological atmosphere

characterized by great freedom and creativity. This gave Latin American theologians the courage to think for themselves about pastoral problems affecting their countries. This process could be seen at work among both Catholic and Protestant thinkers with the group Church and Society in Latin America (ISAL) taking a prominent part. There were frequent meetings between Catholic theologians (Gustavo Gutiérrez, Segundo Galilea, Juan Luis Segundo, Lucio Gera, and others) and Protestant Emilio Castro, Julio de Santa Ana, Rubem Alves, José Míguez Bonino), leading to intensified reflection on the relationship between faith and poverty, the gospel and social justice, and the like. In Brazil, between 1959 and 1964, the Catholic left produced a series of basic texts on the need for a Christian ideal of history, linked to popular action, with a methodology that foreshadowed that of liberation theology; they urged personal engagement in the world, backed up by studies of social and liberal sciences, and illustrated by the universal principles of Christianity. At a meeting of Latin American theologians held in Petrópolis (Rio de Janeiro) in March 1964, Gustavo Gutiérrez described theology as critical reflection on praxis. This line of thought was further developed at meetings in Havana, Bogotá, and Cuernavaca in June and July 1965. Many other meetings were held as part of the preparatory work for the Medellín conference of 1968; these acted as laboratories for a theology worked out on the basis of pastoral concerns and committed Christian action. Lectures given by Gustavo Gutiérrez in Montreal in 1967 and at Chimbote in Peru on the poverty of the Third World and the challenge it posed to the development of a pastoral strategy of liberation were a further powerful impetus toward a theology of liberation. Its outlines were first put forward at the theological congress at Cartigny, Switzerland, in 1969:

### **"Toward a Theology of Liberation."**

The first Catholic congresses devoted to liberation theology were held in Bogotá in March 1970 and July 1971. On the Protestant side, ISAL organized something similar in Buenos Aires the same years. Finally, in December 1971, Gustavo Gutiérrez published his seminal work, *Teología de la liberación*. In May Hugo Assmarm had conducted a symposium, "Oppression-Liberation: The Challenge to Christians," in Montevideo, and Leonardo Boff had published a series of articles under the title *Jesus Cristo Libertador*. The door was opened for the development of a theology from the periphery dealing with the concerns of this periphery, concerns that presented and still present an immense challenge to the evangelizing mission of the church.

### **Formulation**

For the sake of clarity and a better understanding of the advances made, the formulation of liberation theology can be divided into four stages.

## **The Foundational Stage**

The foundations were laid by those who sketched the general outlines of this way of doing theology. Besides the all-important writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, outstanding works were produced by Juan Luis Segundo: *De la sociedad a la teología* (1970), *Liberación de la teología* (1975); by Hugo Assmann: *Teología desde la praxis de liberación*; Lucio Gera: *Apuntes para una interpretación de la Iglesia argentina* (1970), *Teología de la liberación* (1973). Others who should be mentioned were Bishop (later Cardinal) Eduardo Pironio, secretary of CELAM, Segundo Galilea, and Raimondo Caramuru, principal theological consultant to the Brazilian Bishops' Conference. There was also a great ferment of activity in the shape of courses and retreats during this period.

On the Protestant side, besides Emilio Castro and Julio de Santa Ana, the outstanding contributions were made by Rubem Alves: *Religion: Opium of the People or Instrument of Liberation* (1969), and José Míguez Bonino: *La fe en busca de eficacia* (1967) and *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (1975).

Lay persons such as Héctor Borrat, Methol Ferré, and Luiz Alberto Gómez de Souza did valuable work in linking theology with the social sciences, as did the Belgian priest François Houtart and the Chilean G. Arroyo.

## **The Building Stage**

The first stage was characterized by the presentation of liberation theology as a sort of "fundamental theology" -- that is, as an opening up of new horizons and perspectives that gave a new outlook on the whole of theology. The second stage moved on to the first efforts at giving the liberation approach doctrinal content. Three areas received most attention as corresponding to the most urgent needs in the life of the church: spirituality, christology, and ecclesiology. There was a wide range of publications from many Latin American countries. The main writers: in Argentina, Enrique Dussel, Juan Carlos Scarmone, Severino Croatto, and Aldo Buntig; in Brazil, João Batista Libânio, Frei Betio, Carlos Maintains, José Comblin, Eduardo Hoornaert, José Oscar Beozzo, Gilberto Gorgulho, Carlos Palácio, Leonardo Boff; in Chile, Ronaldo Muñoz, Sergio Torres, and Pablo Richard; in Mexico, Raúl Vidales, Luis del Valle, Arnaldo Zenteno, Camilo Maccise, and Jesús García; in Central America, Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino, Juan H. Pico, Uriel Molina; in Venezuela, Pedro Trigo and Otto Maduro (sociologist); in Colombia, Luis Patiño and Cecilio de Llorca.

## **The Settling-in Stage**

With the process of theological reflection well advanced, the need was seen for a dual process of "settling in" if the theology of liberation was to become firmly established. On the one hand was the understanding that the theological current needed to be given a firm epistemological basis: how to avoid duplications and confusions of language and levels while giving coherent expression to the themes arising from original spiritual experience, taking in the analytical seeing stage, moving on to the theological judging stage, and so to the pastoral action stage? Good liberation theology presupposes the art of linking its theories with the explicit inclusion of practice; in this arm liberation theology found fruitful collaborators, not only for its own purposes, but for those of the overall theological process. On the other hand, the "settling in" process was effectively achieved through the deliberate mingling of theologians and other intellectuals in popular circles and processes of liberation.

More and more theologians became pastors too, militant agents of inspiration for the life of the church at its grass roots and those of society. It became usual to see theologians taking part in involved epistemological discussions in learned congresses, then leaving to go back to their bases among the people to become involved in matters of catechesis, trade union politics, and community organization. Names again are many; a **selection** should include Antônio A. da Silva, Rogério de Almeida Cunha, Clodovis Boff, Hugo d'Ans, Francisco Taborda, Marcelo de Barros, and Eliseu Lopes, all from Brazil; Elsa Tamez and Victorio Araya from Costa Rica; D. Irarrazaval, Carmen Lima, Riolando Ames, R. Antoncich, and the late Hugo Echegaray from Peru; Victor Codina from Bolivia; Virgilio Elizondo from Texas; J. L. Caravia from Ecuador; P. Lăennec, from Haiti.

## **The Formalization Stage**

Any original theological vision tends, with the passage of time and through its own internal logic, to seek more formal expression. Liberation theology always set out to reexamine the whole basic content of revelation and tradition so as to bring out the social and liberating dimensions implicit in both sources. Again, this is not a matter of reducing the totality of mystery to this one dimension, but of underlining aspects of a greater truth particularly relevant to our context of oppression and liberation.

Such a formalization also corresponds to pastoral requirements. The last few years have seen a great extension of situations in which the church has become involved with the oppressed, with a very large number of pastoral workers involved. Many movements have come into being under the tutelage, to a large extent, of liberation theology; these in turn have posed new challenges to liberation theology. In Brazil alone, there are movements or centers for black unity and conscientization, human rights, defense of slum-dwellers, marginalized women, mission to Amerindians,

rural pastoral strategy, and so forth -- all concerned in one way or another with the poorest of the poor seeking liberation.

To cope with this broad pastoral need and give theological underpinning to the training of pastoral workers, a group of more than one hundred Catholic theologians (with ecumenical contacts and Protestant collaborators) have been planning a series of fifty-five volumes under the heading *Theology and Liberation*, with Portuguese and Spanish publication starting in late 1985 and translations into other languages planned. Its aim will be to cover all the basic themes of theology and pastoral work from a liberation viewpoint. There are too many persons involved at this stage to list them here: all those from the earlier stages would be included, together with a number of new collaborators.

## **Support and Opposition**

Liberation theology spread by virtue of the inner dynamism with which it codified Christian faith as it applies to the pastoral needs of the poor. Meetings, congresses, theological reviews, and the support of prophetic bishops -- Hélder Câmara, Luis Proaño, Samuel Ruiz, Sergio Méndez Arceo, and Cardinals Paulo Evaristo Arns and D. A. Lorscheider, among many others -- have helped to give it weight and credibility.

A series of events has been instrumental in spreading this theology and ensuring its "reception" among theologians the world over:

- The congress at El Escorial, Spain, in July 1972 on the subject of "Christian faith and the transformation of society in Latin America."
- The first congress of Latin American theologians, held in Mexico City in August 1975.
- The first formal contacts between liberation theologians and advocates of U.S. black liberation and other liberation movements-feminist, Amerindian, and the like.
- The creation of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in 1976 and the congresses it has held: Dar es Salaam in 1976, Accra in 1977, Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka, in 1979, Situ Paulo in 1980, Geneva in 1983, Oaxtepec, Mexico, in 1986. All these produced Final Conclusions with their particular characteristics, but all within the framework of liberation theology.

Finally, the international theological review *Concilium* (published in seven languages) devoted a complete issue (vol. 6, no. 10, June 1974) to the subject of liberation theology, with all the articles coming from Latin American liberation theologians.

A number of important reviews in Latin America have become regular vehicles for the publication of articles and discussions by liberation theologians: in Mexico, *Christus, Servir, and Contacto*; in Venezuela, *SIC*; in Chile, *Pastoral Popular*, in Brazil, *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira (REB)*, *Grande Sinal*, *Puebla*, and *Perspectiva Teológica*; in El Salvador, *Estudios Centroamericanos (ECA)* and *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología*; in Panama, *Diológico Social*.

Most countries in Latin America also have centers for theological and pastoral studies: CEAS (Centro de Estudos e Ação, Salvador), CEP (Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, Lima), ITER (Instituto de Teologia do Recife), DEI (Departamento Euménico de Investigaciones, San José, Costa Rica), CAV (Centre Antonio Valdivieso, Managua), and many more. They have been important for training students imbued with a liberation approach.

While all these developments were taking place, reservations and opposition began to be expressed by some who feared the faith was becoming overpoliticized, and by others who mistrusted any use of Marxist categories in analyzing social structures. Also many were unable to accept the deep changes in the structure of capitalist society postulated by this theology. This negative reaction crystallized around three figures in particular: Alfonso López Trujillo, formerly secretary and later president of CELAM, Roger Vekemans of CEDIAL (Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo e Integración de América Latina, Bogota) and the review *Tierra Nueva*, and Bonaventura Kloppenburg, formerly director of the Medellin Pastoral Institute, later auxiliary bishop of Salvador, Brazil, and author of *Christian Salvation and Human Temporal Progress* (1979).

## **The Magisterium of the Church**

As a general rule, the magisterium watches the development of new theologies with close attention but rarely intervenes and then only with great caution and discreet support or opposition. As far back as 1971, the final document "Justice in the World," the topic of the second ordinary assembly of the Synod of Bishops, already showed traces of liberation theology. Its echoes had become much stronger by 1974, at the third assembly of the Synod, on "Evangelization of the Modern World." The following year, Paul VI devoted fifteen paragraphs of his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* to the relationship between evangelization and liberation (nos. 25-39). This discussion forms the central core of the document, and without attempting to summarize the Pope's position, we can just say that it is one of the most profound, balanced, and theological expositions yet made of the longing of the oppressed for liberation.

The magisterium has also produced the "Instruction on Some Aspects of Liberation Theology," under the auspices of the Prefect and Secretariat of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, dated August 6, 1984, and published September 3. The

main points about this document are its legitimation of the expression and purpose of liberation theology, and its warning to Christians of the risk inherent in an uncritical acceptance of Marxism as a dominant principle in theological endeavor. The subject had been studied in Rome since 1974, and had been the concern of innumerable sessions of the International Theological Commission, though it did not publish any results until 1977, when it produced a "Declaration on Human Development and Christian Salvation" (included as an appendix in Kloppenburg's book mentioned above), which shows a grasp of the questions such as was to be expected from such an august theological body.

The magisterium of the church in Latin America has expressed itself primarily through the documents of two conferences. The second general conference of the episcopate of Latin America, held at Medellin, Colombia, in 1968, spoke of the church "listening to the cry of the poor and becoming the interpreter of their anguish"; this was the first flowering of the theme of liberation, which began to be worked out systematically only after Medellin. The third general conference, held at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, shows the theme of liberation running right through its final document. The liberation dimension is seen as an "integral part" (§§355, 1254, 1283) of the mission of the church, "indispensable" (§§562, 1270), "essential" (§1302). A large part of the document (§§470-506) is devoted to evangelization, liberation, and human promotion, and a whole chapter (§§1134-56) to the "preferential option for the poor," a central axis of liberation theology.

The general tenor of the pronouncements of the magisterium, whether papal or coming from the Synod of Bishops, has been to recognize the positive aspects of liberation theology, especially with reference to the poor and the need for their liberation, as forming part of the universal heritage of Christian commitment to history. Criticisms of certain tendencies within liberation theology, which have to be taken into account, do not negate the vigorous and healthy nucleus of this form of Christian thinking, which has done so much to bring the message of the historical Jesus to the world of today.

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